

Skaldic Poetics and the Making of the *Sagas of Icelanders*

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The writing of the *First Grammatical Treatise* signals an important stage in the development of textual culture in the North. The author's reasons for the writing of the treatise are propounded in this often cited passage from the *Prologue*:

til þess at hægra verði at rita ok lesa sem nú tíðisk ok á þessu landi bæði lög ok áttvísi eða þýðingar helgar eða svá þau hin spaklegu fræði er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bœkr sett af skynsamlegu viti þá hefir ek ok ritat oss Íslendingum stafróf . . . latínustofum öllum þeim er mér þótti gegna til várs máls.

In order that it may become easier to write and read, as is now customary in this country as well, both the laws and genealogies, or interpretations of sacred writings, or also that sagacious (historical) lore that Ari Þorgilsson has recorded in books with such reasonable understanding, I have composed an alphabet for us Icelanders as well . . . of all those Latin letters that seemed to me to fit our language well.¹

1. *First Grammatical Treatise: Introduction, Texts, Notes, Translation, Vocabulary, and Facsimilies*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, University of Iceland Publications in Linguistics 1 (Reykjavík: Institute of Nordic Linguistics, 1972), 208.

This statement is significant for at least two reasons: it sets out a plan to adapt the Latin alphabet to the Icelandic language in order to regulate writing, and it lists examples of literary activity in Iceland in the period 1125–75. It is clear that the First Grammarian refers to works that have been written down already at the time of composition, but not to those transmitted orally at his time, such as skaldic poetry. He is describing *literary* culture, not *oral* culture.

The only known contextualizing of an indigenous stanza in the Latin alphabet prior to the writing of the treatise is indeed in one of the works mentioned in the Prologue. Ari fróði (the Learned) Þorgilsson refers in *Íslendingabók* (written ca. 1122–33) to a humorous ditty in Eddic meter recited by the recently converted Hjalti Skeggjason at the Alþingi in 999 or 1000. This stanza is not cited in the text to authorize Ari's account of the conversion of Iceland; rather, it is employed for humorous effect and to throw into relief Hjalti's relaxed and indifferent attitude toward his abandoned pagan faith at the sacred assembly. The First Grammarian presumably regarded the ditty as an integral part of Ari's narrative rather than as a separate entity worthy of Hjalti's authorship.

Judging from the numerous references to named poets from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, and subsequent testimonies to their verse-making in sagas and treatises after the composition of the *First Grammatical Treatise*, we can surmise that a large quantity of poems and stanzas from the preceding centuries was transmitted orally in the twelfth century.² A great deal of interpretation and scrutiny had to be exercised before oral poetry could be put to writing in the Latin alphabet, and exact rules of orthography and phonology were necessary to secure a faithful, or at least generally acceptable, presentation of the verse in the context of official historiography. It is tempting to argue for a link between the theorizing of the Icelandic language as early as the *First Grammatical Treatise* and the ingenious use of oral verse as source material in royal chronicles in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The *First Grammatical Treatise* would have

2. The existing skaldic corpus consists of sixteen thousand lines and some 5400 stanzas, the majority of which is composed after the conversion to Christianity; see Roberta Frank, "Skaldic Poetry," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 161, and the website of the *Skaldic Edition of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*: www.skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.

admirably fulfilled the need for a solid foundation for the encoding of oral literature needed by the chroniclers, even though the author does not indicate that he wrote the treatise for that reason.³

Skaldic verse-making in the twelfth century was vibrant on at least four levels: (1) Skaldic poetry was used in everyday exchange between people in Iceland, if the evidence of the sagas in *Sturlunga* can be trusted. (2) Skaldic verse-making was actively practiced in the west Nordic region (Norway, Orkney, and the British Isles), and the poets dedicated their verse to kings and earls; this poetry was later used, or seen to be used, to authorize saga narratives of the patrons. (3) A number of narrative poems composed in the twelfth century, such as Einarr Skúlason's "Geisli" and the anonymous "Placitus drápa," reveal attempts to create metrical narratives of the past—though these experiments did not gain a following.⁴ It is likely that both poems were written down early; "Placitus drápa" is preserved in a manuscript from ca. 1200 and "Geisli" was recited in the cathedral of Niðarós in the presence of three kings and a bishop in 1152/3 and possibly presented to these eminencies in written form as well. (4) The Icelandic-Orkadian poem "Háttalykill" from the middle of the twelfth century is an early sign of a systematic study of skaldic meter in the grammatical tradition, which was developed more fully in the thirteenth century. The First Grammarian is not untouched by this diverse skaldic activity. He cites skaldic couplets on two occasions in his treatise, and he was very likely influenced by the alliterative technique of the skalds in his application of minimal pairs in his analysis of the sound system. Skaldic verse was clearly not exclusively studied in the contexts of the royal court and royal historiography in

3. For a more detailed discussion of the *First Grammatical Treatise*, see Guðrún Nordal, "Metrical learning and the First Grammatical Treatise," in *Versatility in Versification*, ed. Tonya Kim Dewey and Frog (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 23–38, where I argue that it is likely that the *First Grammatical Treatise* was written, or at least used, for this purpose. See also Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the 12th and 13th Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

4. See Guðrún Nordal, "Samhengið í íslenskum fornþéttmenntum," in *Sagnabeimur: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 6 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2001), 91–106, where I argue that the narrative poems are in fact early and unsuccessful attempts at saga writing, and that this thread was picked up again by the *rímur* poets in the fourteenth century.

the late twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries, but was practiced at different levels in society and in various social contexts in the west Nordic region.

The key question addressed in this paper is how we might set the cultural milieu of court poets and skaldic poetics, which underpinned royal vernacular historiography, against the making of the sagas of Icelanders in the same period. Theodore Andersson is correct in proposing a correlation between the writing of the kings' sagas and some sagas of the Icelanders in the thirteenth century, but he does not reflect on the importance of skaldic verse in the aesthetic and cultural relationship between these two genres.⁵ I believe, on the other hand, that the first stages in the writing of the sagas of Icelanders cannot be fully elucidated unless we balance the literary production of the poets and the saga authors against the systematic study of skaldic poetry as well as the application of skaldic verse in royal historiography in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. From the point of view of verse citations there are clear generic boundaries between the kings' sagas and the sagas of Icelanders. Bjarne Fidjestøl noted that even though the same poet figures in the kings' sagas and the sagas of Icelanders, there is little overlap between the stanzas cited by them in the kings' sagas on the one hand, and in the sagas of Icelanders on the other.⁶ However, the gray area between the two genres is of great interest and will be explored below.

Skaldic verse played a pivotal role in contextualizing many of the early sagas of Icelanders, such as *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Njáls saga*. Even though the dating of the sagas of Icelanders is less clear than that of the kings' sagas, I would argue that the way skaldic verse is cited in a saga and the identification of the poets can reveal the cultural milieu of the author, the intended audience, and possibly the time when the poetry was composed. Before I turn to the sagas of Icelanders, it will be necessary to draw up a picture of the cultural mobility of the poets and the saga authors in the early thirteenth century, as it will be one of the contentions of this essay that the

5. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

6. Bjarne Fidjestøl, "On a New Edition of Skaldic Poetry," in *The Sixth International Saga Conference 28.7. – 2.8.1985: Workshop Papers*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Det Arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985), 1:319–35.

audience in Norway and the historical circumstances that inspired the writing of the large royal histories also motivated the writing of some of the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders).

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Royal chronicles either written by Norwegian authors or patronized by Norwegian kings in the late twelfth century incorporate skaldic stanzas composed in a predominantly illiterate society, but it took time for the verse to be fully accepted as reliable source material in chronicle writing. The function of verse in the earliest kings' sagas before Snorri, such as in *Sverris saga*, Theodoricus's *Historia*, and *Ágrip*, can be judged to be aesthetic rather than historical. These three works are completely different in character. *Sverris saga* is a contemporary saga, written in the vernacular for the king himself, and references to verse composed for the king were not needed to authorize the account. In fact, the author makes little use of the numerous poems thought to have been composed for King Sverrir Sigurðarson (1151–1202; ruled 1177–1202), but interestingly he preserves a speech interlaced with two skaldic quotations by the king.⁷ Theodoricus writes his Latin chronicle for Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson of Niðarós (?–1188; archbishop 1161–88); he refers to the existence of verse but makes no attempt to translate any in his narrative. The author of *Ágrip* does not use skaldic verse as source material, but rather as embellishment in the narrative. It seems therefore that the authoritative role of skaldic verse in the vernacular textual culture and the setting up of a hierarchy of verse by the court poets, in the context of *grammatica* and royal vernacular historiography, had not fully materialized in the late twelfth century.⁸

The creation of the skaldic canon was conditioned by historical circumstances in Norway in the first half of the thirteenth century,

7. *Sverris saga etter Cod. Am.* 327 4to, ed. Gustrav Indrebø (Kristiania [Oslo], 1920), 50–51.

8. See Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "The Prosimetrum Form 1: Verses as the Voice of the Past," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole, *Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 27 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 172–90; see also Guðrún Nordal, "Attraction of Opposites: Skaldic Verse in *Njáls saga*," in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, *The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization* 16 (Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, 2005), 213–15.

the consolidation of royal power in Norway, and subsequent strengthening of the royal court as a cultural center. The subject matter of the verse reveals the intended audience of the kings' sagas, that is, the aristocratic milieu in Norway, Iceland, and Orkney, and most importantly the royal court; and the provenance of the verse suggests the places of writing of the early historical texts. Snorri Sturluson and his literary community in the first half of the thirteenth century are responsible for transmitting about one-sixth of the preserved skaldic corpus, or the greater part of the skaldic canon of the kings' sagas and *Snorra Edda*. Their mapping of the corpus was achieved in the first half of the thirteenth century, and was for the most part reproduced unchanged in the ensuing tradition of royal historiography and skaldic poetics until the end of the fourteenth century.

The writing of *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Morkinskinna* commenced at a time of violent internal strife between the contenders for the Norwegian throne, resulting in the ascension of Hákon Hákonarson as the king in 1217 at the tender age of thirteen. After more than a twenty-year period of sharing his power with his father-in-law Earl (later Duke) Skúli Bárðarson, Hákon consolidated his sole rule of the country at Skúli's death in 1240, culminating in his coronation by the Pope's cardinal in 1247. The prologue to *Heimskringla* does not state that the work was written for the King or Earl Skúli, even though royal patronage is highly likely for a work of such a political nature. Snorri's "Háttatal" may be a guide in this direction; it is composed in honor of both Hákon and Skúli, indeed favoring Skúli.⁹ Even though the writing of *Heimskringla* would have started and matured in Snorri's time, it is likely that the prototype was not finished till 1259, as Jonna Louis-Jensen has shown, and the version we regard as the archetype is the Kringla manuscript from ca. 1270.¹⁰

The encoding of skaldic verse in royal historiography served at least three purposes: first, to solidify the Icelanders' position as the carriers of the skaldic tradition and the collective memory of the Scandinavian past; second, to authenticate the verse, of pagan and

9. See Guðrún Nordal, "Skáldið Snorri Sturluson," in *Snorrastefna*, 25.-27. júlí 1990, ed. Úlfar Bragason, Rit Stofnunar Sigurðar Nordals 1 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), 52-69.

10. Jonna Louis-Jensen, "Heimskringla: et værk af Snorri Sturluson?" *Nordica Bergensia* 14 (1997): 231-45.

Christian origin, as a foundation for the writing of royal vernacular historiography; and third, to strengthen Hákon's claim to the throne and to mythologize his royal lineage in line with other European royal families. The interlacing of verse by Icelandic poets in the sagas of the Norwegian kings, with whom a number of Icelandic chieftains at the time claimed kinship, was furthermore a highly political act in an Icelandic-Norwegian context. Theodoricus and Saxo both noted that the Icelanders preserved a wealth of oral poetry, but these oral riches were without value unless they could be converted into transferable goods in the new textual culture. The authorization of skaldic verse through royal chronology and the grammatical method seems to have been accepted by writers and audiences alike throughout the thirteenth century, and we would expect this preoccupation with skaldic verse to have influenced the way skaldic verse was incorporated into other saga genres, such as the sagas of Icelanders and the *fornaldarsögur*, particularly those sagas that can be associated with the same subject matter as that of the kings' sagas.¹¹ The translation of the verse from oral transmission to written texts, in all three indigenous saga genres, coincided with the first visible attempts of the Icelandic aristocracy at carving out a niche for themselves at court in Norway, and it was skaldic poetry that gave them the most significant advantage at the literary level.

Snorri Sturluson was the first powerful chieftain known to make this claim. Snorri was preoccupied with Norway all his life, and by Norway I mean the Norwegian aristocratic milieu, the court, the earls, and the king himself. Long before his first journey to Norway in 1218, probably during his formative years at Oddi before 1200, he sent a now-lost poem to King Sverrir Sigurðarson, which some argue may have been a memorial poem sent after Sverrir's death in 1202, though it could just as likely have been sent to Norway during Sverrir's reign. Some years later he bequeathed a poem to Earl Hákon galinn, Sverrir's nephew, and received precious presents from Norway in return: a shield, a sword, and armor—hence a complete knightly outfit—and a praising stanza by the court poet Máni, known from

11. See Guðrún Nordal, "Poetic Voices in the *fornaldarsögur*," in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen et al. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 139–51.

Sverris saga. The icing on the cake was a generous invitation to stay with Hákon galinn. The author of *Íslendinga saga* comments deftly, “mjök var þat í skapi Snorra” (this was very much to Snorri’s liking).¹² However, Earl Hákon galinn died in 1214 before he could receive the ambitious Icelander. In the year 1217 Snorri marched into the terrain at the Alþingi with six hundred (or seven hundred and twenty) men, and among those were eighty armored Norwegians.¹³ Where did they and their costly armor come from? Why did Snorri maintain such a large Norwegian following in Iceland in the period before his first known journey to Norway? On this same occasion it is noted that he called his booth “Grýla,” the same name that is associated with a part of the saga of Sverrir Sigurðarson. Is this a coincidence? These glimpses into Snorri’s life are important clues to his disposition towards the court and courtly life before he arrives in Norway in 1218.¹⁴ The young Snorri is eagerly imitating foreign aristocratic models, and thirsty for royal recognition.

The Sturlungar family was not the only one to seek royal favors through its literary creations. Icelandic chieftains began to identify themselves with European aristocrats in the twelfth century, but particularly in the thirteenth century, through the writing of royal histories, genealogies, myths of the settlement, and skaldic poetry. The Oddaverjar linked their lineage directly to the Norwegian dynasties. Jón Loftsson was the son of Þóra, Magnúss berfœtr’s illegitimate daughter. The poem “Nóregskonungatal” (ca. 1180) composed for Jón Loptsson, Snorri Sturluson’s foster-father, resembles a kings’ saga in a nutshell. It is preserved only in the famous kings’ saga manuscript Flateyjarbók. If scholars are right in associating works such as *Skjöldunga saga* and *Völsunga saga* with Oddi, it would be a further indication of the Oddaverjar’s interest in the heroic and royal past of their family, which was in their view also that of the Norwegian King Hákon. Gizurr Þorvaldsson, the first earl of Iceland, had the privilege

12. *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), 1:269.

13. Ibid. The number of men depends on whether the author is intending long hundreds (120) or conventional hundreds.

14. On Snorri’s use of cultural capital, see Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004); published in a revised translation as *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, Islandica 57 (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2014).

of calling King Hákon Hákonarson his *frændi* (kinsman) due to his kinship with the Oddaverjar.¹⁵ This blood association with King Hákon is emphasized in *Sturlunga saga*, probably due to endeavors on the part of the writer to substantiate the legitimacy of Gizurr's earldom.

The Oddaverjar, Haukdælir, and Sturlungar were the three families most overtly engrossed in their relationship with the Norwegian royal house in the thirteenth century. The Haukdælir in the south of Iceland and the Sturlungar in the west and northwest of Iceland were in direct competition for the earldom in Iceland. The fourth family was the Seldælir in the Westfjords, the descendants of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson was not considered of royal descent, but his saga depicts him as an overtly religious man, almost a saint-like figure, commanding the divine gift of healing presented to his great-grandfather through the mediation of King Óláfr Haraldsson, Saint Óláfr. Hrafn Oddsson, his grandson and Sturla Sighvatsson's son-in-law, became the most powerful man in Iceland after the death of Gizurr Þorvaldsson in 1268.

Snorri was the first of these influential chieftains, called *hofðingjar*, to go to Norway and to present to the earl or king his own poetry, and probably his knowledge of the old skaldic lore, but he was by no means the last. Other chieftains presented their poetry at the court; Gizurr Þorvaldsson was one. Sturla Þórðarson achieved the ultimate prize when Magnús lagabætir, Hákon's son and Skúli's grandson, hired him to write the saga of King Hákon and then that of himself. There, Sturla follows Hákon's life in scrupulous detail, relying on eye-witnesses and written material at court, and even though he did not meet Hákon once in his life, he embeds in Hákon's chronicle 102 stanzas of his own making.

3

It is to be expected that these poets, authors, and courtiers, who were also fighting one another for the rule of Iceland on behalf of King Hákon, would not only focus their literary activity on the Norwegian royal family, past and present, but also have sagas written of their own

15. *Sturlunga saga*, Jón Jóhannesson, 1:493.

lineage and strengthen their claim to earldom by drawing attention to their families' roots in Norway and to the poetry respected and enjoyed by kings and earls in the west Nordic region. This was indeed the case. Skaldic verse was not only an important building block in the making of the kings' sagas in the first half of the thirteenth century, but also of other saga genres, such as the sagas of Icelanders and the *foraldarsögur*, setting out the pre-history of many of the settlers of Iceland.

Two proposals will be put to test in the ensuing discussion of the *Íslendingasögur*: (1) Is it possible to link the subject matter of the sagas of Icelanders and their use of skaldic poetry to the same cultural milieu that fostered the study of skaldic poetry and the writing of the kings' sagas? (2) Further, were the authors of the kings' sagas and the known court poets, who were also courtiers and indeed kinsmen of the Norwegian king, likely patrons of the sagas, their intended audience, or indeed the writers of sagas about their own lineages and their history in Iceland?

The corpus of the sagas of Icelanders counts some forty texts. The sagas differ in length, subject matter, and use of stylistic devices, but they have three distinct features in common: the time frame of their narrative (from the settlement period to the establishment of the Icelandic church, ca. 870–1050), the main places of action (Iceland, Scandinavia, Greenland, and the British Isles), and the period in which they are written (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). A precise dating of individual sagas within the two centuries in question is impossible, particularly in those cases where no early manuscript exists to provide a *terminus ante quem* for their writing. The process of dating is, however, *de facto* another way of describing the evolution or the growth of a *genre*. Scholars have sought to explain the making of the sagas of Icelanders from different viewpoints: from the saga authors' sense of realism;¹⁶ from the sagas' interaction with other datable genres such as the kings' sagas and *foraldarsögur*;¹⁷ from the sagas' footing in their time of writing;¹⁸ from the alternative ways in

16. See Sigurður Nordal, "Sagalitteraturen," in *Litteraturhistorie*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Nordisk Kultur 8B (Stockholm: Bonniers förlag, 1953), 180–273.

17. See Andersson, *Growth*; see also Vésteinn Ólason, "The Fantastic Element in Fourteenth Century *Íslendingasögur*: A Survey," *Gripla* 18 (2007): 7–22.

18. See Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni* (note 14).

which social, moral and political questions are treated in the sagas;¹⁹ from the sagas' origin in oral story-telling;²⁰ and from the date of the earliest manuscript,²¹ to name only few examples.

A skaldic stanza in a prose narrative represents the cultural footprint of the author. The practice and study of skaldic poetry in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries changed over time, as we have noted, and left behind incomparable witnesses, treatises, textbooks and sagas, which testify to a flourishing tradition that provides a backdrop against which the *prosimetrum* form of the sagas of Icelanders must be set. The complex characteristics of skaldic verse, the intricacies of its diction and meter, imply furthermore that the citation of verse in a prose narrative is never straightforward, but lends ambiguity to the narrative, demands interpretation, and challenges the reader and listener to take a stand. The text and the chosen meter of the stanza are not only impregnated with meaning, but the identity of the poet, if known outside the boundaries of the text, and particularly if he is a respected court poet of the canon known in vernacular royal chronicles, suggests cultural connotations that reflect on the author of the saga and his cultural milieu.

In a paper published in 2007 I set out a division of the sagas of Icelanders depending on their citation of verse in the narrative and the origin of the poet, which I will use as a sounding board for the ensuing discussion. According to my yardstick eight groups emerge:

1. The sagas of the court poets (the skalds' sagas): *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Egils saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga*, and *Kormáks saga*.
2. Sagas where the main protagonist is a poet: *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Hávarðar saga*, *Víglundar saga*, and *Þórðar saga breðu*.
3. A saga with a strong royal or courtly emphasis: *Laxdæla saga*.

19. See Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

20. See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar: Tilgáta um aðferð* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 2002); Tommy Danielsson, *Hrafnkels saga eller fallet med den undflyende traditionen* (Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag, 2002).

21. See Örnólfur Thorsson, "Leitin að landinu fagra": Hugleiðing um rannsóknir á íslenskum fornþekkingum," *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1992): 28–53.

4. Two fourteenth-century sagas with a strong royal emphasis: *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Finnboga saga ramma*.
5. Sagas dated to the fourteenth century that display distinct learned interest in the past: *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*; *Flóamanna saga*; *Kjalnesinga saga*; *Króka-Refs saga*; and the two Vinland sagas, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*. (Only a small quantity of verse is cited in these sagas.)
6. Moral tales: *Bandamanna saga*, *Hænsa Þóris saga*, and *Hrafnkels saga*.
7. Sagas relating events in the Eastfjords and the northeast of Iceland: *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, and *Ólkofra saga* in the Eastfjords; and *Ljósveitninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga* (the only stanza in the saga is also cited in *Víga-Glúms saga*), and *Valla-Ljóts saga* in the northeast of Iceland.
8. Sagas where verse is an integral part of the narrative while there is no principal poet: *Njáls saga*, *Heiðarvígja saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Svarfdæla saga*.

In this paper I would like to revisit this division and focus on the handful of sagas where the narrative is interlaced with poetry by the canonized poets of royal historiography and skaldic poetics, i.e. the sagas in groups 1 and 8, and briefly note at the end *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Hávarðar saga* in group 2.

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The six skalds' sagas are for obvious reasons most closely linked to the making of the kings' sagas and skaldic poetics, as they depict the lives and conquests of poets who traveled abroad and gained recognition for their skaldic verse-making at the courts of kings and aristocratic patrons.²² Four of the sagas are especially pertinent in relation to the canonization of skaldic poetry in *Snorra Edda* and the kings' sagas: *Egils saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Fóstbrœðra saga*. Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson, and Kormákr Ógmundsson are among the most respected poets of the skaldic canon in *Snorra Edda* and "Skáldatal," but Egill stands out for not being cited in the kings'

22. See Poole, *Skaldsagas* (note 8 above).

saga corpus. Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld is ignored in *Snorra Edda*, notwithstanding his conspicuous presence at the court of King Óláfr Haraldsson.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson was not a court poet of the Norwegian kings, the reasons for which his saga makes abundantly clear. It can therefore be argued that the impetus for the writing of his saga in the middle of the thirteenth century was to secure his poetry a place within a narrative framework. It is of note that Egill is not listed in the “Skáldatal” version preserved in conjunction with *Heimskringla*, but his name is added to the version in the Uppsala *Edda* where he is listed as the poet of Arinbjörn hersis and King Athelstan. His verse would have been lost were it not for scattered citations in the poetical treatises. Egill’s verse is cited in two works attributed to named chieftains and scholars of the Sturlungar family, Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* and Óláfr Þórðarson’s *Third Grammatical Treatise*. The Sturlungar were the descendants of Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s family, the Mýrarmenn, and there are strong reasons to place the writing of *Egils saga* in the Sturlungar’s cultural milieu, even though it narrows the reading of this anonymous saga to attribute the saga to a named author.

Hallfreðr Óttarsson is the main poet of the saga of his name, and his verse is furthermore an important component in the saga of King Óláfr Tryggvason. Hallfreðr’s verse is cited in *Snorra Edda* and in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*; and he is noted as King Óláfr’s poet in both versions of “Skáldatal.” *Hallfreðar saga* is preserved as an independent saga in only one manuscript, Möðruvallabók, written ca. 1330–70, but his life was so closely associated with that of the king that the saga was incorporated into the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason in the fourteenth century. The same can be said of Kormákr, though his saga is not preserved in conjunction with any of the fourteenth-century kings’ sagas compilations. Kormákr’s verse is cited in the kings’ sagas, *Snorra Edda*, the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, and he is listed in both versions of “Skáldatal” as the poet of Earl Sigurðr. The saga is preserved complete in only one manuscript, again in Möðruvallabók, but in addition a fragment of the saga exists from the middle of the fourteenth century.

Fóstbræðra saga is clearly a learned saga, preserved in Hauksbók and Möðruvallabók, and interwoven into the saga of King Óláfr

helgi in Flateyjarbók.²³ It is of note that Þormóðr's verse is not cited in *Snorra Edda*, even though his verse is known from *Heimskringla*. A stanza attributed to Þormóðr in *Fóstbræðra saga* is cited anonymously in *Third Grammatical Treatise* and he is noted in both versions of "Skáldatal" as the poet of Saint Óláfr. *Fóstbræðra saga* stands out from most *Íslendingasögur* in using poetry as a vehicle to authenticate the depiction of events and characters. The method of citing "Þorgeirsdrápa," Þormóðr's praise-poem for his foster-brother Þorgeirr Hávarsson, as source material for the representation of Þorgeirr's fights and conquests in the first part of the saga gives the impression that the saga is based in part on the poem. This narrative technique, reminiscent of the citation of verse in the authorized kings' sagas, is also used in part of *Eyrbyggja saga*, as I will show below. The praise-poem genre seems to have been exclusive to royal or foreign aristocratic patrons, and only few praise-poems or memorial poems about Icelanders have been preserved before the thirteenth century: "Þorgeirsdrápa" in *Fóstbræðra saga*, "Sonatorrek" in *Egils saga*, Arnórr jarlaskáld's lost *drápa* about Gellir Þorkelsson in *Laxdæla*, and "Hrafnsmál" by Þormóðr Trefilsson in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Þormóðr's loose stanzas, some cited on his journey to Greenland and the others with King Óláfr in Norway, are interlaced into the narrative in the second part of the saga, and some stanzas are the same as those cited in *Heimskringla*.

The other two skalds' sagas have a looser connection with the skaldic canon and vernacular royal historiography, which may indicate that they were either written later in the century in reaction to the established skaldic canon or that they serve different cultural ends. The two poets of *Gunnlaugs saga* do not belong to the canonized poets, even though they are represented in the saga as court poets. The verse of Hrafn and Gunnlaugr is cited neither in the kings' sagas nor in *Snorra Edda*, but Gunnlaugr, like Egill, is added to the list of poets in the version of "Skáldatal" in the Uppsala *Edda* as the court poet of King Aethelred II of England. It is likely that the saga of Gunnlaugr invited this addition. The introduction to *Gunnlaugs saga* in the fourteenth-century Stockholm manuscript (ca. 1300–25) puts

23. See Jónas Kristjánsson, *Um Fóstbræðrasögu* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1972), who dates the saga to ca. 1300.

a distance between the time of writing of the saga in that manuscript and the first half of the thirteenth century:

Saga þeira Hrafn ok Gunnlaugs ormstungu, eptir því sem sagt hefir Ari prestr inn fróði Þorgilsson, er mestr fræðimaðr hefir verit á Íslandi á landnámssögur ok forna fræði.²⁴

This is the saga of Hrafn and of Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue, as told by the priest Ari Þorgilsson the Learned, who was the most knowledgeable of stories of the settlement and other ancient lore of anyone to have lived in Iceland.²⁵

The writer of this manuscript implies that the saga is based on secondary evidence or the old lore of Ari fróði Þorgilsson, the most respected witness to the history of Iceland. He then goes on to describe the family of the Mýrarmenn, starting with Þorsteinn, Egill Skallagrímsson's son. Some men of the family are said to have been

menn vænstir, en þat sé þó mjög sundrgreiniligt, því at sumir í þeiri ætt er kallat, at ljótastir menn hafi verit. Í þeiri ætt hafa ok verit margir atgörvismenn um marga hluti, sem var Kjartan Ólafsson pá ok Víga-Barði ok Skúli Þorsteinsson. Sumir váru ok skáldmenn miklir í þeiri ætt: Björn Hítðelakappi, Einarr prestr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson ok margir aðrir. (*Gunnlaugs saga*, ÍF 3:51n3)

exceptionally good-looking men, whereas others are said to have been very ugly. Many members of the family were particularly talented in various ways, as were Kjartan Ólafsson, Víga-Barði, and Skúli Þorsteinsson. Some of them were also great poets, like Björn Hítðelakappi, the priest Einarr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson and many others. (*Saga of Gunnlaug*, 306)

24. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), hereafter *Gunnlaugs saga*, ÍF 3, 51n.

25. *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, trans. Katrina C. Attwood, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), hereafter *Saga of Gunnlaug*, 305. Here and subsequently, the translation has been modified to reflect the original orthography of Icelandic personal names.

The reference to Snorri Sturluson is of special note here. He is in the company of his kinsmen, Einarr Skúlason and Björn Hítðelakappi, and the three of them are noted as the greatest poets (*skáldmenn miklir*) of the family. The court poet Skúli Þorsteinsson is listed with two well-known heroes of the sagas of Icelanders, Kjartan Ólafsson (*Laxdæla saga*) and Víga-Barði (*Heiðarvíga saga*). He was the foster-father of Björn Hítðelakappi. The author links these descendants of Egill together, which indicates that the subject matter and kinship were used at the time to categorize sagas such as *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*. This connection between the descendants of Egill and the main heroes of these—Kjartan Ólafsson; Hallr Guðmundarson, Víga-Barði's brother; Gunnlaugr and Hrafn; and Skúli Þorsteinsson—is also brought out in the final chapter of *Egils saga*.²⁶ These five sagas are strongly associated with the skaldic tradition, even though the author of *Laxdæla saga* shows his deference to the skaldic canon and the poetic narrative technique in a negative manner.

The poetry of Björn Hítðelakappi is not known outside the saga of his name, whereas his rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson was a known court poet in the kings' sagas for his *drápa* ("Eiríksdrápa") about Earl Eiríkr. *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* notes an additional poem by Þórðr devoted to Earl Eiríkr ("Belgskakadrápa") and a *drápa* about King Óláfr Tryggvason. Neither Þórðr nor Björn is noted in "Skáldatal" or *Snorra Edda*. *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* is notoriously poorly preserved. One fragment is preserved from the fourteenth century, but the complete saga has come down to us only in a seventeenth-century manuscript. A part of *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* (and also of *Laxdæla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*) is preserved in Bæjarbók, a manuscript of *Óláfs saga* from ca. 1400, now lost except for four leaves but preserved in transcriptions from ca. 1700. The introductory words to the saga in Bæjarbók are noteworthy:

Nú skal segja nokkut af þeim íslensku mönnum, sem uppi váru um daga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar ok hans urðu heimuligir vinir. Nefnir þar til fyrstan ágætan mann, Þorkel Eyjólffsson, er átti Guðrúnu

26. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1932), 299–300.

Ósvífrsdóttur, því at í þenna tíma var Þorkell í fõrum ok var jafnan með Óláfi konungi vel virðr, þá er hann var útanlands.²⁷

Now some account is to be given of the Icelanders who lived in the days of King Óláfr Haraldsson, and became his intimate friends. The first of these to be mentioned was an excellent man, Þorkel Eyjólfsson, who married Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. At that time Þorkell was on trading voyages, and was always highly esteemed at King Óláfr's court when he was abroad.²⁸

The sagas of Gunnlaugr and Björn are personal in character, and are not focused on the relationship with the king, like *Egils saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*.

The skalds' sagas are to varying degrees in dialogue with the kings' sagas or the canonized skaldic corpus, yet their representation of the poets' travels and interactions with foreign kings can profitably be set against the backdrop of the kings' sagas. The three sagas most closely associated with the Mýrarmenn, *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, depict the lives of poets who did not achieve canonical status in the kings' sagas, and these sagas serve to show the lives and failures of the poets, and highlight their successes outside the Norwegian court. The three sagas from the northwest of Iceland and the Westfjords, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*, take their cue from the motive of the love-sick skald who enjoyed the recognition of foreign dignitaries and the freedom of his travels abroad. Hallfreðr's and Þormóðr's destinies became intertwined with that of the king, just as their sagas were incorporated into the vast subject matter associated with each of the two Olafs.

The four sagas in group 8 cite verses by known poets of the skaldic canon even though none of them is among the most respected of the court poets. These sagas are not concerned with poets' recognition at the royal court or the fate of the poets; rather they are

27. *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 111.

28. *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*, trans. Alison Finlay, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 255.

focused on events in Iceland and the workings of feud and vengeance. The subtle and nuanced use of skaldic poetry in the narrative of these sagas betrays the authors' intention of putting the genre of the sagas of Icelanders on a level with the kings' sagas. The authors of *Njáls saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga* cite verse by known poets in order to authenticate parts of their accounts, and *Svarfdæla saga* moreover contains stanzas attributed to the well-known poet Þorleifr jarlaskáld. There are twenty-three stanzas common to all manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, as well as the poem "Darraðarljóð" cited in the last section of the saga. The earliest manuscripts contain, however, additional stanzas which are mainly spoken by the two tragic heroes of the first half of the saga, Gunnarr Hámundarson (twelve stanzas) and Skarpheðinn Njálsson (ten stanzas). The stanzas are added to the narrative only in the pagan part of the saga (chapters 1–99). Skaldic poetry serves to change and modify the depiction of these figures in the saga, in a similar way as the stanzas by Kári Sǫlmundarson do in the final part of the saga. The author of the saga cites a poet outside the framework of the saga after the death of Gunnarr Hámundarson, and the full-length poem "Darraðarljóð."²⁹

Fifteen stanzas are preserved in *Heiðarvíga saga*: two are found in the first part preserved only in the rendering of the lost text by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík; one stanza is by Leiknir (the same stanza is attributed to his brother Hallr in *Eyrbyggja saga*), and another by Gestr Oddleifsson (probably lifted out of the *Laufásedda* manuscript by Jón Ólafsson). The remaining thirteen stanzas are very cleverly and interestingly woven into the narrative. They are not used to draw attention to any particular characters in the saga; instead they emphasize powerful scenes and give credence to the subject matter. Þuríðr, the wife of Barði Guðmundsson and daughter of Óláfr pá, composes a stanza when she incites her husband to revenge. Þorbjörn Brúnason speaks two powerful stanzas when his wife serves him a bloody meal in order to incite him to action, and the following night he is visited by two dream-women who recite two stanzas. Gísli Þórgautsson speaks a stanza about his forebodings just before he is killed in Gullteigr. All

29. On Skaldic verse in *Njáls saga*, see further my "Attraction of Opposites," 211–36, and "Tilbrigði um *Njálu*," *Ritið* 3 (2005): 57–76.

of these stanzas are related, in one way or another, to the culminating battle, the *Heiðarvíg*.

The stanzas by Eiríkr víðsjá, who is also a known poet in the learned culture through a citation in the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise*, are cited as a commentary on the action and as a testimony to the accuracy of the saga's account of the killings. The writer uses skaldic poetry as source material, in similarity to the kings' sagas, and this technique is also at play in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Eiríkr víðsjá is not the only poet called as a witness to the *Heiðarvíg* in the saga. Tindr, the brother of Illugi svarti at Gilsbakki (the father of Gunnlaugr ormstunga), recites two stanzas relating to the battle. The authors of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* use skaldic poetry to authenticate their account, and are careful in choosing respected poets for this purpose.

The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* takes a bolder step than the writer of *Heiðarvíga saga* toward using skaldic verse as source material. The two first stanzas cited in *Eyrbyggja saga* are from "Illugadrápa," composed by Oddr skáld about Illugi svarti, the father of Gunnlaugr ormstunga. The stanzas serve as documentary evidence, in the same way as verse in the kings' sagas does. Snorri goði is the focal point; his talent for leadership in the service of the good of the district is substantiated at this early stage in his life. The stanzas are not spoken as part of the narrative, but referred to as source material. With this formal introduction the audience of the saga is reinforced in the belief that Snorri goði is the main character in the saga, the person around whom the saga will evolve. The stanzas are not drawn from *lausavísur*, but from a longer, datable, and thus reliable poem.

Other verses of such formal character are the famous "Máhlíðingavísur," by Þórarinn Máhlíðingr, the nephew of Arnkell Þórólfsson, spoken in three dialogue scenes after the killing of Þorbjörn digri at Fróðá, the husband of Þuríður Barkardóttir, Snorri goði's sister. Þórarinn's poetry was known in learned circles, at least in the Sturlungs' learned milieu; a half-stanza is cited in Snorri Sturluson's "Háttatal" in *Snorra Edda*.³⁰ Substantial research has gone into the dating of these stanzas. Russell Poole concludes that they were

30. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Gad, 1926).

composed in the late eleventh or twelfth century in praise of Snorri goði's deeds, and other scholars concur with his assessment.³¹

Interlaced throughout *Eyrbyggja saga* are five laudatory stanzas by Þormóður Trefilsson from a poem about Snorri goði (st. 20, ch. 26; st. 26, ch. 37; st. 33, ch. 44; st. 34, ch. 56; st. 35, ch. 62). The stanzas seem to belong to the same poem originally, even though they are all introduced in a different way. Þormóður is known, from entries in Hauksbók and *Þórðarbók of Landnámabók*, to have composed in praise of Snorri goði. These sources post-date *Eyrbyggja saga*, and are not, therefore, of independent value.

Skaldic stanzas are used with precision in the saga to highlight and enlarge Snorri's character in relation to others. The stanzas are placed at strategic points in the saga. The verse is carefully chosen; sequences of verse, rather than occasional *lausavísur*, i.e. formal verse, rather than occasional stanzas, and the reference to praise poems in honor of Snorri goði all contribute to his aristocratic portrayal in the saga. His worthiness recounted in praise-poems invites implicit comparison with earls, or even kings, in other countries. This is no coincidence: Snorri goði Þorgrímsson was the forefather of the Sturlungs, and this portrayal may be their own. Another source may support such a "royal" reading of Snorri's life. One of the backbones of the saga is "The life of Snorri goði," a brief synopsis of his life, preserved in one of the manuscripts containing *Eyrbyggja saga* (Melabók).³² This biographical outline has been attributed to Ari Þorgilsson, and if this is so, this short text would place writings about Snorri goði against the cultural backdrop of the beginnings of royal historiography in Iceland.

Three other sagas of Icelanders belonging to group 2 cite verses by poets mentioned in the skaldic canon. Víga-Glúmr is among the acknowledged poets of the canon in *Snorra Edda*, cited three times in *Skáldskaparmál* in the Codex Regius manuscript, and two of these

31. See Russell Poole, "The Origins of *Máblíðingavísur*," *Scandinavian Studies* 57 (1985): 244–85. See also Vésteinn Ólason, "Máblíðingamál: Authorship and Tradition in a Part of *Eyrbyggja saga*," in *Úr Döllum til dala: Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, ed. Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs 11 (Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds, 1989), 187–203.

32. Appended to *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), 185–86.

examples are also cited in his saga. His verse is not found in the kings' sagas or in "Skáldatal." Grettir Ásmundarson and Hávarðr are cited only once each in *Snorra Edda*.³³ Grettir's stanza is cited in his saga—but Hávarðr halti's is not. None of these poets are known court poets, according to "Skáldatal," and are accordingly not cited in the kings' sagas.

5

I have noted above the importance of taking into account the historical circumstances in Norway at the time of the writing of the kings' sagas. Similarly, we need to consider the implications of unfolding political changes in Norway and the cultural transformations at its court for the development of the writing of sagas about the forefathers and foremothers of those Icelanders who were seeking the favor of the King Hákon gamli and other dignitaries in the thirteenth century. The use of skaldic verse in the early chronicles of the kings was not only fundamental to the authenticity of vernacular royal historiography, but also in the political interest of Hákon gamli. The cultural influences at his court were complex, and references to the canon of skaldic poets were fundamental to vouchsafe the authenticity of narratives concerning the royal lineage, but once they had been put to writing they had served their purpose. When King Hákon had secured the foundations of his lineage in well-documented vernacular royal chronicles, he could focus his ambition on molding his royal court after the European model, such as in France and England. The translation of courtly literature, most specifically from Anglo-Norman or French into Old Norwegian from 1225 onward, reveals these cultural endeavors.³⁴ Courtly values and emotions influenced not only Sturla Þórðarson's writing of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, but also the writing of the *Íslendingasögur*, as we can see most clearly in *Laxdæla saga*, which belongs to the same cultural milieu as many of the skalds' sagas.

33. See Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 78–79.

34. See Carolyn Larrington, "Queens and Bodies: The Norwegian Translated *lais* and Hákon IV's Kinwomen," *JEGP* 108 (2009): 506–27.

The authors of the thirteen sagas discussed above reveal the impact of the old skaldic model and the new imported models to varying degrees. It is likely, as was proposed above, that the Icelandic aristocracy, many of whom were courtiers of the Norwegian king, were the patrons of the sagas about their own lineages and their history in Iceland, their intended audience, or indeed the writers of sagas. The use of skaldic poetry in the narrative clearly depends on the subject matter and the identification of the poet and whether he is the main character of the saga or not, but the theme of the love-sick skald is regularly touched with borrowings from the world of romance. Both strands, the indigenous and the imported, are equally conditioned by the royal court.

Two of the best known skalds' sagas, *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*, are focused on the royal court; these sagas are interpreted in light of the king's saga and are later even understood to be an integral part of the king's life. The three skalds' sagas of the Mýrar-menn family and the descendants of Egill, *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*, on the other hand, serve to glorify the poetic skills of the Sturlungar family, though none of them are known court poets, and thus boost the legitimacy and the poetic patrimony of the family at the time of writing. Notwithstanding *Heiðarvígja saga's* and *Eyrbyggja saga's* close affiliation with these three skalds' sagas, their authors measured their narrative against the model of the kings' sagas, and thus broadened the political and narrative scope of their sagas. The same is true of *Njáls saga*. These three sagas achieved a new standard in the way the narrative takes its cue from different narrative standards and the skaldic model.

Laxdæla saga is similarly a ground-breaking saga. It belongs to the same cultural milieu as that of *Eyrbyggja saga* and some of the skalds' sagas from the west of Iceland, yet the author shapes the subject matter and characters in an independent way. The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* constructs a "royal" portrayal of the main character, Snorri goði Þorgrímsson, by authenticating the account with formal skaldic verse³⁵ and punctuating the main events in his life with verse citations. The author of *Laxdæla saga* deliberately

35. See my discussion in "The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders," in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. Judy Quinn et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, Belgium, 2007), 219–38.

avoids such references to skaldic verse in the narrative. Both sagas are preoccupied with Norwegian pre-history, and describe the flight of independently-minded Norwegian chieftains to Iceland via the British Isles because of the tyranny of Haraldr hárfagri.³⁶ The central characters are friends, Snorri goði and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, and each plays a part in the other's saga. Both sagas are written in the second half of the thirteenth century but draw on opposite cultural reference points: *Eyrbyggja saga* is rooted in indigenous traditions, referring to local folklore, the power of the supernatural in the narrative, and supposedly authenticated skaldic verse, whereas *Laxdæla saga*, while also drawing on local story-telling, is indebted to the mannerisms or literary techniques of courtly romances and heroic legends.

The difference between these two sagas, written at the same time and possibly in the same cultural milieu and in the same family, must be explained in terms of different goals of the authors in their depiction of their main characters. Snorri goði Þorgrímsson is depicted as an Icelandic aristocrat, his actions serving as a prequel to those of his aristocratic descendants in the Sturlungar family in the thirteenth century, who most probably had a hand in shaping the saga in the mold of a king's saga, even underpinning the saga with a reference to a brief synopsis of his life.³⁷ The saga of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is no less strikingly "royal" in its character descriptions and visual traits.³⁸ These aristocratic patterns are not, however, drawn from the indigenous traditions of royal historiography, but rather from the world of courtly romance and the heroic legends of Sigurðr, Guðrún and Brynhildr. The references to skaldic verse in the two sagas are most poignant in this respect, and bring home the significance of paying due notice to a saga's social and cultural context.

36. One strand in the interpretation of the "skaldic" sagas is their reference to the settlement and Iceland's pre-history; see my "Alternative Criteria for the Dating of the Sagas of Icelanders," in *Á austrvega: Saga and East Scandinavia, Preprint Papers of The 14th Saga Conference, Uppsala 9th – 15th August 2009*, ed. Agneta Ney et al., 2 vols. (Gävle: University of Gävle, 2009), 1:336–42.

37. This life of Snorri goði is only preserved in a late fourteenth-century manuscript (Melabók) and it has been attributed by some scholars to Ari fróði Þorgilsson. See *Eyrbyggja saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, xxx.

38. See Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Háskólaútgáfan: Reykjavík, 2002); see also "Svör Ármanns Jakobssonar við and-mælaræðum," *Gripla* 14 (2005): 314–21.

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